

Naval War College Review

Volume 54
Number 4 *Autumn*

Article 4

2001

Strategic Geography and the Greater Middle East

Robert Harkavy

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review>

Recommended Citation

Harkavy, Robert (2001) "Strategic Geography and the Greater Middle East," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 54 : No. 4 , Article 4.
Available at: <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol54/iss4/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Naval War College Review by an authorized editor of U.S. Naval War College Digital Commons. For more information, please contact repository.inquiries@usnwc.edu.

Dr. Harkavy is professor of political science at Pennsylvania State University. He has also taught, performed research, or served at the U.S. Army War College, Cornell University, the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, Kalamazoo College, the U.S. Atomic Energy Commission, the Crocker-Anglo Bank, and the Chemical Fund. He earned his Ph.D. in international relations at Yale University in 1973, having pursued graduate study also at the University of California at Berkeley, the Harvard Business School, and Basel University in Switzerland. After earning his B.A. at Cornell, he was for eight years a junior officer in the U.S. Army Reserve (artillery). He has written or edited several books, most recently Warfare and the Third World (St. Martin's Press, 2001), and Strategic Geography and the Changing Middle East (Brookings, 1997). This article is adapted from a paper delivered at the Naval War College in March 2001.

Because it was prepared before the 11 September 2001 attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon, the article cannot and does not reflect ongoing events flowing from it.

Naval War College Review, Autumn 2001, Vol. LIV, No. 4

STRATEGIC GEOGRAPHY AND THE GREATER MIDDLE EAST

Robert Harkavy

Occupying a pivotal position at the juncture of Europe, Africa, and Asia, the “Greater Middle East”—here defined as the sum of the core Middle East, North Africa, the African Horn, South Asia, and ex-Soviet Central Asia—likewise occupies a crucial position with respect to some of the major issue areas of the contemporary era.¹ Those issue areas are energy sources and availability; the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and their delivery systems; and the dangerous pairings involving Israel and the Arabs, Iran and Iraq, and India and Pakistan. Surely, this region in its aggregate has come to be viewed by the contending and aspiring world powers—the United States, Russia, a united Europe, China—as a strategic prize, maybe *the* strategic prize.

The geographic aspects of these issues can be analyzed by moving from macro to micro, from grand strategy to operations and tactics (climate and terrain). The new missile programs involving WMD do not easily fit within this framework but apply across issues.

TRADITIONAL AND EMERGING IMAGES

A sketch of traditional geopolitical theory would go somewhat as follows.² Alfred Thayer Mahan and Halford Mackinder advanced what appeared to be contrary views on the relative importance of sea and land power for global dominance. Both focused on a global struggle for power between a Eurasian-based land power and a “rimland”-based sea power in the context of global maritime dominance. Mackinder thought that land power was destined to prevail, because of such emerging technological developments as motorized transport, and road and rail networks, which would simplify logistics between the Eurasian core and

the periphery; indeed, he argued, these might also allow the “heartland” power to achieve maritime superiority as well. Mahan read the opposite into emerging technological trends, seeing in them possibilities for dominance by a maritime power, able to project power more easily than before all around the rimland.³

What has been the legacy of geopolitics? Geopolitics must be understood as “a conceptual and terminological tradition in the study of the political and strategic relevance of geography.”⁴ Accordingly, even in the nineteenth century, geopolitics was

concerned with the implications for power politics of the geographical attributes of states, and of their spatial locations. . . . In the abstract, geopolitics traditionally indicates the links and causal relationships between political power and geographic space; in concrete terms it is often seen as a body of thought assaying specific strategic prescriptions based on the relative importance of land power and sea power in world history. . . . The geopolitical tradition had some consistent concerns, like the geopolitical correlates of power in world politics, the identification of international core areas, and the relationships between naval and terrestrial capabilities.⁵

Nicholas Spykman developed the “rimland” thesis in contrast to Mackinder’s “heartland” doctrine. Both believed that at given times, certain regions become pivotal.⁶ Mackinder saw the Russia–Eastern Europe area as pivotal. Spykman contended that considerations like population, size, resources, and economic development combined to make the rimland—peninsular Europe and the coastal Far East—the most significant geopolitical zone, domination of which meant global hegemony. American interests thus dictated that the European or the Far Eastern coastland not be dominated by any hostile coalition.

Saul Cohen has used the term “shatterbelts” as roughly equivalent to the concept of the rimland—“a large, strategically located region that is occupied by a number of conflicting states and is caught between the conflicting interests of adjoining Great Powers.”⁷ Cohen sees the Middle East and Southeast Asia as the primary shatterbelt regions, and, contrary to Samuel Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” thesis (about which more below), he holds that “the Shatterbelt appears to be incapable of attaining political or economic unity of action. . . . [I]t is because internal differences are so marked, and because they are found in a region that is crushed between outside interests [Cohen was writing during the Cold War], that we have defined the Middle East as a shatterbelt.”⁸

In brief, the core of geopolitical theory boils down to two fundamental questions, questions relevant both before and after the events of 1989–91. The first concerns the role of strategic geography—factors of size and location; the second pertains to militarily important terrain, maritime choke points, and areas containing critical resources.

In recent years still another strand of international relations thinking has come to the fore. “Long-cycle theory,” associated with George Modelski and William Thompson, holds that the centuries since 1500 have seen a progression of global hegemonies, lasting about a century apiece, based on maritime and commercial preeminence.⁹ This model of successive periods of maritime dominance punctuated by major wars is closely related to Mahan’s thesis of undivided naval dominance, but it adds a role for technological breakthroughs in inaugurating periods of hegemony. It is noteworthy that the successive long-cycle hegemonies have had important bases in some of the same places around the Indian Ocean littoral—in the Horn of Africa, around the Straits of Hormuz and Tiran (Aden, Oman), the coasts of India, Sri Lanka, and around the Indonesian Straits.¹⁰

NEW GEOPOLITICAL IMAGES

That much is familiar to most students of international relations. With the Cold War gone, what new geopolitical images have been projected? Six come to mind—ideal (and not altogether discrete) tendencies from which hybrid or transitional models might be generated, in addition to the familiar North-South model: the three-bloc geo-economic thesis, balance of power, the “clash of civilizations,” “zones of peace” and “zones of turmoil,” the United States as unipolar hegemon, and a revived bipolar competition. Several of these merit brief review.

Economic competition between three blocs has become central to current geo-economic thinking. It assumes that the emerging foci of international relations are: a Japan-led Pacific Rim region including China, Korea, Indonesia, Thailand, and other East Asian powers; a United States–led Western Hemisphere bloc centered on the North American Free Trade Agreement group but potentially encompassing most of Latin America; and a Germany-centered European bloc, assumed to include Russia and other former Soviet states and perhaps also North Africa. The status of Africa and South Asia in this view is ambiguous, if not marginal; the Middle East becomes a wild card, a geo-economic prize.¹¹ The three-bloc model also incorporates the now widely discussed “end of history” thesis, which proceeds from the end of big-power ideological conflict that dominated the global stage after the 1930s to the prediction that such conflicts will not recur but be superseded by older economic rivalries. Related to this is the popular “democratic peace” theme, which asserts that modern democratic states with high levels of per capita income do not even contemplate fighting each other and never have.¹² Rather, in this view, they exist in Karl Deutsch’s rather hoary concept of the “security community.”¹³

This is indeed a primitive vision. Some would question, for instance, whether in an era of extensive economic interdependence, multinational industry, and

THE CORE MIDDLE EAST



globalized production of so many goods, a three-bloc model of this sort captures the realities of international trade and investment. Further, the three-bloc model may be too state-centric, too prone to viewing trade as merely between nations rather than throughout a complex web of global corporate patterns of development, production, and marketing. The three-bloc thesis assumes that the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans form natural dividing lines between the Americas bloc and the other two. As such, it ignores the possibility that still newer regional economic blocs might span the

great oceans. Competing analyses have begun to focus on “regionalism,” or “region states,” within Europe, Asia, and North America—for example, that region running from Bavaria to northern Italy, the zone comprising Hong Kong and southern China, the “growth triangle” of Singapore and nearby Indonesian islands, or the Seattle/Vancouver area.¹⁴

The prospect of renewed multipolarity, or a balance of power, reminiscent of the Europe of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been propounded by Henry Kissinger, *The Economist*, and others.¹⁵ In its various manifestations, it portends an international system having five or six poles of roughly equal weights: the United States, a united Europe, Japan, China, Russia, and perhaps India. It further portends the eventual demise of communism in China and thereafter the absence of competition based on ideological factors in alliances or rivalries, implying the prospect of ever-shifting alliances. It might be the United States and Europe versus the rest in one phase, the United States and China versus Russia plus Europe and India in another. It is not clear whether the United States could or would maintain such naval dominance and bases as were seen in earlier centuries in the face of asymmetries not present then (large Russian and Chinese land armies).

Hence, in this conception, the Islamic Greater Middle East becomes in effect one pole in a rather complex system, with fault lines running between it and Europe, Russia, and India. That would appear to mean a fundamental imbalance of power, in military terms at least, against Islam, perhaps somewhat counterbalanced by oil and gas reserves and their associated political leverage. Because

China, India, Japan and the rest of East Asia, Europe, and the United States are all projected to remain heavily dependent on gas and oil from the Greater Middle East “energy ellipse,” the energy producers are assured of being intensely wooed by the other poles.¹⁶

The “clash of civilizations” model formulated by Samuel Huntington has captured the attention of students of international affairs, particularly in connection with the Greater Middle East.¹⁷

It is my hypothesis that the fundamental source of conflict in this new world will not be primarily ideological or primarily economic. The great divisions among human-kind and the dominating source of conflict will be cultural. Nation states will remain the most powerful actors in world affairs, but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and groups of different civilizations. The clash of civilizations will dominate global politics. The fault lines between civilizations will be the battle lines of the future.¹⁸

Declaring that “fault lines between civilizations are replacing the political and ideological boundaries of the Cold War as the flash points for crisis and bloodshed,” Huntington focuses particularly on the cultural lines of demarcation between Western Christianity and Orthodox Christianity in Europe, and between the latter and Islam.¹⁹ The most significant dividing line in Europe, he says, may be the eastern boundary of Western Christianity as of the year 1500. Huntington’s thesis is underscored by the several continuing conflicts along this old fault line—in Bosnia, Kosovo, the Turkish-Bulgarian frontier, between Armenia and Azerbaijan, in Chechnya, and in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Tadjikistan). Huntington addresses the long interaction between Western Christianity and Islam, noting that the West’s military superiority as recently as the Gulf War humiliated some Arabs, reinforcing Islamic movements that reject Western political and cultural values. This can be seen even in Indonesia. Hence, it is with some of these conflicts in mind that Huntington predicts that “the next world war, if there is one, will be a war between civilizations.”²⁰

A further image, the “zones of peace/zones of turmoil” model, was propounded in Max Singer’s and Aaron Wildavsky’s *The Real World Order*, which holds that “the key to understanding the real world is to separate the world into two parts,” one of which is “zones of peace, wealth and democracy,” and the other “zones of turmoil, war and development.”²¹ In this view, the combination of geo-economics and democratic-peace theory supports the prospects of the zones of peace—Western Europe, the United States and Canada, Japan and the Antipodes, comprising about 15 percent of the world’s population. The rest of the world, including eastern and southeastern Europe, the territory of the former

Soviet Union, and most of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, is composed of what are, for now, zones of turmoil and development.

The Singer-Wildavsky thesis abuts at least two other topics of current speculation. First, it is in basic agreement with the idea that there has been a fundamental shift in world affairs among the traditional powers whereby warfare becomes an anachronism, as did slavery. In the view of Singer and Wildavsky, however, this applies only to that fraction of the world that is democratic and, relatively speaking, well off.²²

Still another future geopolitical image involves American unipolar dominance, primarily in military strength—far less of economic power, which the United States will have increasingly to share with competitors. American military strength—conventional power projection, space, strategic nuclear—could remain indefinitely preeminent, if the U.S. defense budget is not allowed to slide farther. What was long a deterrent to American interventions, a military peer, is now absent, and no new one can be foreseen.

Finally, the academic literature and think-tank realm have circulated various scenarios envisioning a new hegemonic rival to the United States, a new round of Cold War, and a resumption of global bipolarity. China, of course, figures most prominently.²³ Some scenarios see a united and increasingly hostile Europe as America's coming rival.²⁴ Fewer scenarios dwell on a revived, nationalist Russia (an extrapolation of certain goals and policies of the Putin regime) or a militarily and economically energized Japan.

A contemporary of Mackinder's, James Fairgrieve, suggested the possibility of a heartland farther east than its classical locus between the Vistula River and the Urals, implying that China and its hinterland could become a new heartland, or pivot.²⁵ But caveats are necessary regarding a U.S.-Chinese rivalry in a heartland/rimland framework. China, of course, has a long Pacific coastline; it does not need "warm water ports" (though it may think it needs ports, for loosely equivalent reasons, on the far side of the Indonesian Straits). However, and unlike tsarist Russia as perceived by Mackinder, it is also vulnerable *from* the sea; there is no glacis of mountains like the Hindu Kush, Elburz, and the Caucasus to protect it from invasion by the United States. China, indeed, is itself located on the traditional rimland.

A CONVERGENCE OF GEOPOLITICS AND GEO-ECONOMICS

How might these conflicting definitional and political arguments apply to the Greater Middle East? Does one have to choose between geopolitics and geo-economics? Are they necessarily mutually exclusive?

First, it must be recognized that the geo-economics thesis really applies to relationships between contending major powers and blocs, and in that sense it is

similar to geopolitics, which saw a long-term tendency toward conflict between dominant land and sea powers. The Middle East does not constitute a power center of that sort; the region has been and is an *object* of major power rivalries. Hence, neither a traditional geopolitical nor a mercantile and essentially peaceful geo-economics model is very useful. There is the potential for a great deal of trouble, perhaps even arms races and war, even between the major democracies—the United States, Japan, and the European Union—now thought permanently immune from security competition.

Nevertheless—and despite oil wealth, which has given some regional nations per capita incomes on a par with the Western democracies—the bulk of the Greater Middle East remains squarely within Singer and Wildavsky's "zone of turmoil." It is broadly characterized by an absence of democracy, internal instability, endemic violence, etc. Daily events in Algeria, Egypt, Turkey, Kurdistan, Kashmir, southern Sudan, Afghanistan, Yemen, and so on, offer little encouragement that this region is at the "end of history"—the end of major warfare and security rivalries. In that obvious sense at least, geopolitics is alive and well in the Greater Middle East. It is a powder keg—over which loom weapons of mass destruction and long-range delivery systems.

There is, then, in the Greater Middle East a convergence of geopolitics and geo-economics, if not in their traditional senses. As a further illustration, parts of the region are developing rapidly in terms of infrastructure (roads, ports, pipelines, etc.) and industry (petrochemicals, crucially), and in terms of modern communications, electricity grids, and the like.²⁶ But this development has left many nations highly vulnerable to modern precision weaponry, as demonstrated by the U.S. "takedown" of Iraq's infrastructure during the air assault phase of DESERT STORM. Seawater desalinization plants in the Persian Gulf area, for instance, might be critical targets in future wars. All this makes it a matter of urgency not only whether the Middle East will be a "zone of turmoil," somewhat left out of globalization, but also whether part of it will continue to identify with the "southern" half of a North-South divide.

Of course, Huntington's clash of civilization directly applies here. He points out that conflict has been going on along the fault line between Western and Islamic civilizations for 1,300 years. Huntington, like many other contemporary analysts both Western and Islamic, sees these two civilizations as potentially pitted against each other in a conflict that would define the evolving world order. Not everyone, of course, agrees with Huntington's now widely discussed thesis.²⁷ Nonetheless, to the extent that the clash of civilizations turns out to be predictive, it will be a defining feature of a new strategic map. Perhaps it already is, as concerns the Greater Middle East; the long frontier of the Islamic world—Marrakesh to Bangladesh and beyond—is at the "fault line's" northern end.

While the United States may still be able—norms concerning multilateralism or collective security notwithstanding—to intervene in the Greater Middle East in a repeat of the Gulf War, there are restraints on the exercise of U.S. power in this region. One would be possibly heavy diplomatic pressure from Europe, Russia, and China (maybe combined) against unilateral American action. Also, the U.S. military is now commonly thought (even by its own spokesmen) less capable of large-scale operations than it was a decade ago, technological developments notwithstanding. Third, there are serious questions (or were before the events of 11 September 2001, which occurred as this article was being prepared for press) about whether, in the event of another crisis, the United States would be offered access for its aircraft and ships in the region.

Finally, factors of location and geography now render the heartland/rimland model irrelevant to any China–United States hegemonic competition in the Greater Middle East. Nonetheless, China’s proposed pipeline linking it with Central Asia’s energy reserves, its acquisition of bases on Burma’s offshore islands, and its moves in the South China Sea may well augur a geographically new type of hegemonic competition centered on that part of the old rimland.²⁸ Also, if current hints of a new Russo-Chinese alliance prove substantial, the West could be presented with a threat from a very large heartland abetted by maritime access to the western Pacific. Such an alliance would inevitably put pressure on the Western position in the Middle East and its oil reserves; India would become a wild card.

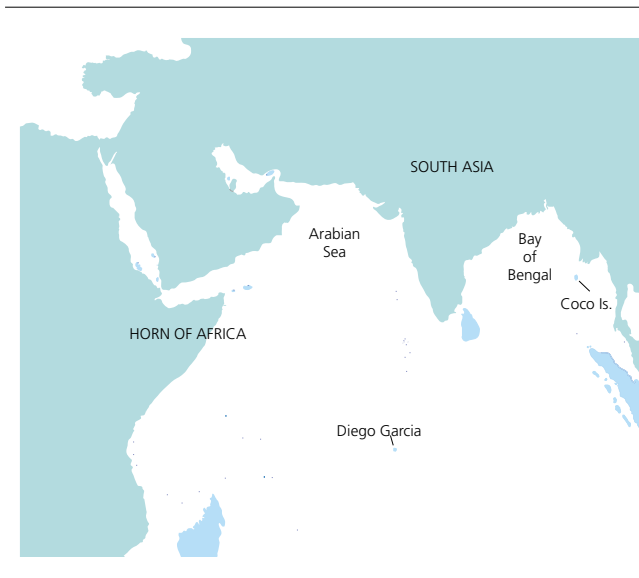
GEOGRAPHY AND POWER PROJECTION INTO THE MIDDLE EAST

The geographic aspects of power projection into the Greater Middle East pertain now mostly to the United States, but in the future they could apply to the European Union (which is developing an independent reaction force capable of out-of-area operations), a revived Russia again a force in the Middle East, or even China, should its naval reach establish itself in Burma’s Coco Islands and extend westward from there. The subject needs separate treatment, but several points can be made here. They pertain to the geography of power projection broadly construed as dealing with military interventions (unilateral or multilateral), arms resupply to client states involved in wars, and coercive diplomacy—and more specifically with bases, access, overflight, and the physical geography of nations, straits, and islands as it affects power projection.²⁹

The experience baseline is the 1990–91 Gulf War, during which the American-led coalition had access to air and naval bases around the periphery of the war zone (Egypt, Turkey, Kenya, and such Gulf states as Oman, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia) and en route from the United States (a variety of countries in Europe, North Africa,

and East and Southeast Asia). Importantly, in what turned out to be the last months of the Cold War, the coalition also had heavy forces and substantial materiel in Europe, as well as materiel and other support at the British-owned island of Diego Garcia, which is located strategically in relation to the Greater Middle East. Staging rights for transport aircraft were granted by India and Thailand, and overflights were allowed even by ex-Warsaw Pact countries.

Planners can no longer count on anything close to such access. A large portion of the troops and aircraft once in Europe has since returned to the conti-



nenal United States. Access to, and transit rights over, such states as Morocco, Egypt, Turkey, and even Saudi Arabia are problematic, depending much more than before on the nature of the crisis, despite a much larger “permanent” presence in several of the Gulf Cooperation Council states. Even Europe could be in question if the political divide between the United States and the European Union over Middle Eastern policies should widen. Hence, worst-case scenarios have envisioned the United States in a tough situation,

attempting to intervene in the Gulf area mostly from bases in the continental United States and from carrier battle groups and amphibious formations.

A number of salient geographic problems emerge in such an analysis. Overflight rights in Europe (notably Spain and France) and in the Middle East itself (Egypt, Saudi Arabia) are prominent among them. So too is basing access in Egypt, Turkey, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman, all in the vicinity of the crucial Gulf. (Israel could be added, however politically undesirable that might be.) Transit rights through Suez and the feasibility of passage through the crucial Bab el Mandeb and the Strait of Tiran also stand out. Diego Garcia is potentially vital, especially if access is denied elsewhere.

A final point here is the geography of a still hypothetical U.S. regional missile-defense system, perhaps entirely sea based. Issues would include the effectiveness of such a system in the Persian Gulf or Arabian Sea, and whether there would be access ashore for replenishment, crew rest, etc. The political geography of that problem looms particularly large in the face of projections of future Iraqi and Iranian nuclear weapons and missile delivery systems.

The Geography of Weapons of Mass Destruction

It is fairly clear that nuclear proliferation in the Greater Middle East will produce arsenals on both sides of each of its three conflict pairings—the Arab world–Israel, Iran–Iraq, and India–Pakistan. Events are also moving toward biological and chemical warfare capability in Iran and several Arab states, including Egypt and Syria; and toward long-range missile capabilities that will allow all of these WMD-armed states to strike not only contiguous rivals but nations far afield. With the exception of North Korea (and of course China, a longtime nuclear state), the concerns that have fueled American interest in homeland ballistic missile defense arise in this region.

Essentially, in its geographical aspects, this subject breaks down into four parts: the contiguous nature of the conflict pairings; the burgeoning threat of WMD-armed ballistic missiles to Europe and the United States; the possibilities for “indirect” or “triangular” deterrence and compellence; and the geography of the movement or smuggling of WMD technology, materials, and skills.

The first point is in clear contrast to the nuclear standoff during the Cold War. Neither the United States nor the Soviet Union had seriously to concern itself with being overrun (though their allies might have been) by the other’s conventional forces. For that matter, even at the height of the Cold War there was little actual hatred between the Russian and American peoples—one almost had the feeling, going back to their combined victory in 1945, that they actually liked each other.³⁰ In the Greater Middle East we have terrific, long-standing, primordial hatreds between peoples; fears that conventional battlefield defeat would be followed by genocide; and very short flight times for missiles and aircraft bearing weapons of mass destruction, producing hair-trigger preemptive situations. Some would argue further that not only are “fail-safe” capabilities of command and control systems more limited than those of the United States and USSR but that irrational, culturally based decisions are more likely.

Secondly, several regional nations are likely eventually to acquire long-range ballistic missiles that could reach not only across the Middle East but well outside it. Pakistan and Israel will be able to target each other. Iran and Iraq will be able to target all of Europe and Russia, maybe later the United States. Israel will be able to target all of Europe and Russia (perhaps to deter any tilt toward, or willingness to resupply with arms, the Arabs). India will be able to target all of China, as well as Russia and Europe, maybe also the United States. Israel and India, at least, could also launch WMD attacks against nations outside the region by aircraft. All of these projections, of course, beg the question of whether the United States, alone or with allies, will be able to install defensive systems effective against at least some kinds of missile attacks.

The Iraqi Scud attacks on Israel and Saudi Arabia during DESERT STORM introduced what may be a new “asymmetric” strategic problem. In the future, a Middle Eastern “rogue state” threatened by the United States may respond against a regional U.S. ally, or even against a nation not at all friendly with the United States, trading on traditional American sensitivity to innocent casualties.³¹ As missile ranges in the Greater Middle East expand, so do the options for such “triangular” strikes.³²

Geography is also largely accountable for the ease of illegal transfers of WMD material from the former Soviet Union to such Middle Eastern states as Iran and Iraq. Much of the old USSR’s nuclear infrastructure was near the borders of neighboring Middle Eastern states; truck routes via Serbia, Bulgaria, and Turkey are hard to monitor.³³ Where there is a will (and money to grease palms), there is likely to be a way.

Operational and Tactical Geography

The military geography of the Greater Middle East affects the operational and tactical levels of warfare in a number ways:³⁴ the conduct of a two-front conventional war; strategic depth; climate; the size of the theater and the length of borders, or of the “forward line of troops”; the ethnography of battle areas or frontiers; patterns of settlements and road networks; and mountains and rivers, as barriers.

The geographical aspects of two-front conventional warfare could be critical in another round of Arab-Israeli fighting should Egypt become involved. However, let us focus on two other points: strategic depth (which relates to nuclear proliferation and possibly warfare) and climate (weather and the seasons), with respect to military technology.

Strategic Depth. “Strategic depth” is a staple of the military literature; it refers, broadly speaking, to the distances between the front lines or battle sectors and the combatants’ industrial core areas, capital cities, heartlands, and other key centers of population or military production. How vulnerable are these assets to a quick, preemptive attack or to a methodical offensive? Conversely, can a country withdraw into its own territory, absorb an initial thrust, and allow the subsequent offensive to culminate short of its goal and far from its source of power? The issue is the trade-off between space and time; a classic historical case is Germany’s failure to knock out the Soviet Union in 1941–42.

How have these traditional considerations applied to recent wars in the Greater Middle East? How have they influenced preemptive attempts to produce dramatic, conclusive victories? How important have been the asymmetries between specific adversaries? In the early stages of the war between Iraq and Iran, Iraq—then considered the weaker power—launched an offensive to seize the

STRATEGIC DEPTH: IRAQ/IRAN



Khuzestan oil region, hoping that the eventual truce would make the conquest permanent. Initially the strategy met with some success, but there was little chance of a quick, decisive Iraqi victory (a more substantial campaign would have required better combined-arms tactics and logistics than Iraq possessed). Iran enjoys vast strategic depth, buttressed by the formidable barriers of a lava plain and the Zagros Mountains, behind its western frontier. Teheran is some 260 miles

from the border, Isfahan approximately 240 miles. The smaller cities of Kermanshah and Ahwaz (just west of the oil fields, which are on the western slopes of the Zagros range) are closer but not easy to overrun in a rapid offensive; only the area around Khorramshahr was vulnerable to a quick “seize and hold” operation.

On the other hand, Iraq has little strategic depth, almost none in the south; throughout the war it was highly vulnerable to Iranian offensives across the Shatt-al-Arab toward Basra, a major city only about ten miles from the frontier. Baghdad, farther north, is only some seventy miles from the border. The major cities in the oil-rich Kurdish area, Kirkuk and Mosul, are less than a hundred miles from the frontier. Additionally, the main roads connecting these cities run parallel to and close to the frontier. In theory, Iraq is subject to knockout by a quick offensive, and Iran made enormous and costly efforts to achieve that end, shelling Basra heavily in the process, though it never succeeded in exploiting Iraq’s vulnerability in strategic depth.

The current India-Pakistan military balance also illustrates the impact of asymmetries in strategic depth. Pakistan is potentially subject to a quick, preemptive attack.³⁵ Its main cities lie even closer to the border than do Iraq’s, and like Iraq its critical road and rail communications run along the frontier. Karachi is a hundred miles from the border, Hyderabad eighty, Islamabad and Rawalpindi fifty, and Lahore only twenty. (Yet in 1965 and 1971 Pakistani forces did manage to defend the border areas against superior forces in short wars.) By contrast, on the Indian side, while Amritsar is vulnerable, only twenty miles from the frontier, Ahmadabad is 120 miles away, New Delhi more than two hundred miles, and

STRATEGIC DEPTH: INDIA/PAKISTAN



Bombay over four hundred. These distances are striking (though the terrain is generally favorable for mechanized forces) in view of well publicized earlier Pakistani ambitions to conduct a lightning preemptive strike toward New Dehli.

The Arab-Israel conflict has also illustrated the importance of strategic depth, although in some surprising ways. Before 1967 it was common to speak of Israel's extreme lack of depth along its borders with Egypt, Jordan, and Syria; from the West Bank, a Jordanian advance of only nine miles west could literally have cut Israel in half. Syria was close to the Galilee settlements, and Egypt was poised to strike quickly at Eilat, Beersheva, and Ashdod, indeed

at all of Israel. But Israel's preemptive assault in 1967 took advantage of interior lines that allowed the small state to act like a "coiled spring."

The denouement gave Israel an additional 120 miles of strategic depth across the northern Sinai, then widely thought to be a margin of badly needed safety. But Israel's setbacks in the early phases of the 1973 war along the Suez Canal proved again that the advantages of strategic depth are at least partially offset by vulnerability resulting from extended lines of communication.³⁶ On the other hand, the 1967 Israeli capture of the Golan Heights proved critical in 1973. Then, and again in 1982, it was of enormous concern to Syria that Israeli forward positions in the Golan were only some thirty miles from Damascus. But paradoxically, Israel was also *more* vulnerable on the Golan in 1973; the very proximity to core areas shortened Syria's lines of communications and lengthened Israel's.

Since then both Israel and Syria have been in a precarious situation of shallow defensive depth vis-à-vis one another, which is why the Golan has remained such a contentious issue. As for Jordan, Amman is only twenty miles from the Jordan Valley, and Jerusalem is almost as close to the Jordanian frontier on the

Jordan River, albeit behind steeper, more imposing defensive terrain. Eilat and Aqaba, the two key ports for Israel and Jordan, on the Gulf of Aqaba, are contiguous mutual hostages. To the north in Lebanon, the fact that Beirut is only sixty miles from Israel's frontier rendered it highly vulnerable in 1982 to a quick armored strike, supported by leapfrogging amphibious operations along the coast.

Generally speaking, then, in the core Middle Eastern zone of conflict, distances are very short and produce fast-moving wars with quick outcomes (the Iran-Iraq War is a partial exception). The implication for weapons of mass destruction is stark and potentially ominous. Israel and Pakistan, and perhaps also Iraq to a lesser degree, labor under the threat that sudden and decisive conventional battlefield defeats could quickly raise the specter of mass destruction, particularly by nuclear weapons.

If a Palestinian state is ever created in the West Bank and Gaza, Israel's security belt in the Jordan Valley is removed, and the Golan Heights are returned to Syria (with or without demilitarized zones), Israel will be returned to the vulnerable strategic situation of pre-June 1967. Its features will include the nine-mile corridor north of Tel Aviv between a new Palestine and the sea, and a danger in the Galilee area of a Syrian attack that quickly menaces Israeli towns. Then too, a vast buildup of Egyptian forces with U.S. weapons, like the M1A1 tank, would open the possibility of an Egyptian attack out of Sinai. Such an assault, threatening Israel as it would with massive and unacceptable casualties, might bring on early use of Israeli tactical nuclear weapons—likewise in the Golan and in the West Bank, if Jordanian or Iraqi forces should mount an attack out of the Jordan Valley area.

Likewise, Pakistan, its population and industrial cores menaced by a quick Indian offensive, might be tempted to almost immediate, at least tactical, nuclear use. Here, by contrast with the Israeli case, such threats might be tempered by Indian escalation dominance up and down the "ladder." Another scenario might be an Indian attempt to take out Pakistan's nuclear infrastructure (also, unavoidably, located near the border), a risky venture that would, escalation dominance notwithstanding, bank precariously on "rational" decision making on the part of the Pakistanis.

Despite Iraq's quasi-victory over Iran in 1988, the facts of demography and gross national product would weigh heavily in Iran's favor in the case of a future conflict (at present, tensions between the two countries are rather low, but bad blood long antedates the 1980–88 war). As noted, Baghdad is not far from the border. Unlike India, Iran may still have only limited capabilities for relatively long-range combined-arms offensives. But Iraq's previous use of chemical warfare could augur a WMD response to a conventional battlefield defeat, Iran's own possession of such weapons notwithstanding.

Climate. The weather and seasons in the Greater Middle East, and related matters of terrain and topography, present a very mixed and varied picture. Fighting has occurred on the Sinai and Rajasthan Deserts; in the mountainous terrain of central Lebanon and the Golan Heights, the Zagros Mountains northeast of Baghdad, the Himalayan foothills in the southern Kashmir region, and the Punjab along the India-Pakistan frontier; in the Rann of Kutch and Haweizeh Marshes; and in the riverine and semijungle areas of Bangladesh. Rugged mountainous terrain has also been the scene of conflict in western Sinai, Yemen, Chechnya, Afghanistan, Georgia, Tadjikistan, Algeria, Kurdish eastern Turkey, and Kurdish northern Iran, among other places. Neither terrain nor extreme environmental conditions preclude military operations.

A major problem regarding the weather itself involves the unique conditions the Greater Middle East presents for high-technology weapons used by the United States and its allies. The climatic conditions in and around Kuwait and southern Iraq were remarkably suitable for the 1991 air campaign (the unusually inclement weather during part of that operation notwithstanding).³⁷ Clear skies favor a side able to achieve virtually uncontested control of the air, like Israel in 1967 and (after a ten-day delay) 1973. Climate also facilitated Israel's destruction of the Osirak reactor in Baghdad in 1981. In the 1980–88 war, the fecklessness of the Iranian and Iraqi air forces rendered such factors largely moot. On the other hand, human beings exposed to the summer desert, winter in Kashmir, or the spring *haboobs* over Iran quickly reach their limits.

What then for the future? Will geography, terrain, and climate offer advantages to modern air forces in future Greater Middle East conflicts? Will “asymmetric strategies” of a passive sort (underground fiber-optic communications, improved camouflage and deception techniques, and traditional methods of clandestine warfare such as the *mujahedin* employed against Soviet forces) prove insurmountable?

Implied here is a technology race involving potential developments on both the high and low sides, advances that can alter asymmetries, as indeed did the introduction of newer surface-to-air missiles and radars into the Suez Canal area in 1973. How well will new reconnaissance satellites penetrate cloud cover and tree cover, and thereby allow effective interdiction in less than optimal conditions? There were hints in the Bosnian and Kosovo operations that such matters had come some distance; if so, air superiority in the Greater Middle East will become more vital than ever. In any event, geography itself will remain the most important strategic factor in military operations in this region.

NOTES

1. See Geoffrey Kemp and Robert E. Harkavy, *Strategic Geography and the Changing Middle East* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1997), pp. 13–5.
2. For further reading see Thomas Mackubin Owens, “In Defense of Classical Geopolitics,” *Naval War College Review*, Autumn 1999, esp. pp. 64–70.
3. A. T. Mahan, *The Influence of Seapower upon History, 1600–1783*, updated ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1980).
4. Oyvind Osterud, “The Uses and Abuses of Geopolitics,” *Journal of Peace Research*, no. 2, 1988, p. 191.
5. *Ibid.*, pp. 191–2.
6. David Wilkinson, “Spykman and Geopolitics,” in *On Geopolitics: Classical and Nuclear*, ed. Ciro Zoppo and Charles Zorgbibe (Dordrecht, Neth.: Martinus Nijhoff, 1985).
7. Saul Cohen, *Geography and Politics in a Divided World* (New York: Random House, 1963), esp. pp. 83–7. He refers to a similar use of the term “crush zones” in James Fairgrieve, *Geography and World Power*, 8th ed. (London: Univ. of London Press, 1941).
8. Cohen, p. 233.
9. The hegemonies are those of Portugal (some scholars prefer Spain), the Netherlands, Great Britain (twice), and the United States. See, for example, George Modelski, *Long Cycles in World Politics* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1985); and George Modelski and William R. Thompson, *Seapower in Global Politics, 1494–1993* (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1988).
10. A pattern William R. Thompson refers to as a “system leader lineage”; see his “Passing the Torch in a Manner of Speaking: The System Leader Lineage,” paper presented at International Studies Association annual meeting, Toronto, 1997.
11. Walter Russell Mead, “On the Road to Ruin,” *Harper’s*, March 1990, pp. 59–64; Jeffrey Garten, *A Cold Peace* (New York: Times Books, 1992); Edward Luttwak, *The Endangered American Dream* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993); and Lester Thurow, *Head to Head: The Coming Economic Battle among Japan, Europe, and America* (New York: William Morrow, 1993).
12. See, amidst a now massive literature, Bruce M. Russett, *Grasping the Democratic Peace* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1993).
13. Karl W. Deutsch, *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957).
14. Kenichi Ohmae, “Rise of the Region State,” *Foreign Affairs*, Spring 1993, pp. 78–87.
15. Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), and “The New World Order: Back to the Future,” *The Economist*, 8 January 1994, pp. 21–3.
16. See Kemp and Harkavy, *Strategic Geography*, chap. 4.
17. Samuel Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” *Foreign Affairs*, Summer 1993, pp. 22–49. See also his *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996).
18. Huntington, “The Clash of Civilizations?” p. 22.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 29.
20. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
21. Max Singer and Aaron Wildavsky, *The Real World Order* (Chatham, N.J.: Chatham House, 1993).
22. The model clearly denies the thesis of Richard Rosecrance positing a historical alternation between periods in which the major powers compete in terms of military security, and others in which they compete on the basis of trade. See his *The Rise of the Trading State* (New York: Basic Books, 1986). The “zones of turmoil” idea finds echoes in some other recent work, such as that of Robert D. Kaplan, who sets out to show “how scarcity, crime, overpopulation, tribalism, and disease are rapidly destroying the social fabric of our planet.” See his “The Coming Anarchy,” *Atlantic Monthly*, February 1994, pp. 44–76, and *The Coming Anarchy: Shattering the Dreams of the Post Cold War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2001).
23. This in light of predictions that China’s gross national product will equal that of the United States in another twenty or thirty years if its high growth rates are maintained. Richard

- Bernstein and Ross H. Munro, *The Coming Conflict with China* (New York: Knopf, 1997).
24. See Robert J. Lieber, "The United States as a Reluctant Hegemon," paper presented at conference on Global Leadership, Stability, and Order: Hegemony and the Provision of International Collective Goods, University of Hohenheim, Germany, June 2000.
 25. Fairgrieve.
 26. See Kemp and Harkavy, *Strategic Geography*, chap. 10.
 27. Fouad Ajami, for instance, believes Huntington underestimates the tenacity of modernity and secularism in the Greater Middle East and elsewhere in the developing world, and he downplays the threat to the West represented by traditionalist movements in Egypt, Algeria, Iran, Turkey, and India, among others. Ajami sees Western culture and values as having been totally and irreversibly internalized in these places, and Huntington as having understated the continuing role of the nation-state. Fouad Ajami, "The Summing-up," *Foreign Affairs*, September–October 1993, pp. 2–9. John Esposito, one of those who oppose this new form of "orientalism," insists that most Islamic movements are not necessarily anti-Western, anti-American, or antidemocratic and that westerners are mistaken in interpreting Islam as a monolith rather than a complex and diverse realm. John L. Esposito, *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* (Oxford, U.K.: Oxford Univ. Press, 1992), esp. pp. 168–212.
 28. See Kemp and Harkavy, *Strategic Geography*, chap. 4, p. 140, regarding a possible pipeline from Tengiz through China to transport Central Asian oil and gas to markets on the Pacific rim. This is still highly conjectural.
 29. A more detailed analysis is in *ibid.*, chap. 7.
 30. See Robert E. Harkavy, "Escalation Ladders and Escalation Dominance: From the Central Nuclear Balance to New Regional Conflicts," in *Strategy and International Politics*, ed. Robert L. Pfaltzgraff and William R. Van Cleave (Frankfurt, Ger.: Peter Lang, 2000), pp. 241–58.
 31. See Robert E. Harkavy, "Triangular or Indirect Deterrence/Compellence," *Comparative Strategy*, January–March 1998, pp. 63–81.
 32. An Iran or Iraq threatened by the United States could in turn threaten Israel, Saudi Arabia, or Turkey (also Germany or Italy). North Korea could threaten Japan if it were threatened by a U.S. strategic campaign. Such a scenario was outlined in Caspar Weinberger and Peter Schweizer, *The Next War* (Lanham, Md.: Regnery, 1996).
 33. See Kemp and Harkavy, *Strategic Geography*, pp. 291–4, "The Geography of Illicit Nuclear Transfers."
 34. A fuller discussion of these aspects appears in *ibid.*, chap. 5.
 35. Discussed in Shirin Tahir-Kheli, "Defense Planning in Pakistan," in *Defense Planning in Less-Industrialized States*, ed. Stephanie Neuman (Lexington, Mass.: D. C. Heath, 1984), chap. 7. According to a Pakistani officer whom she quotes (page 212), "Pakistan feels exposed because its line of communication and the highly developed canal system that irrigates the fertile areas of Pakistan that are critical to its economic survival run close to the Indo-Pakistani border." The Pakistani officer further stated that India's capture of the Pakistani territory within just twenty-five miles of the border would effectively destroy the nation, because its communications, irrigation, industry, and population are "all together within that depth."
 36. See, among others, Chaim Herzog, *The War of Atonement, October 1973* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975), esp. chaps. 1 and 18.
 37. U.S. Dept. of Defense, *Conduct of the Persian Gulf War: Final Report to Congress*, pursuant to Title V of the Persian Gulf Conflict Supplemental Authorization and Personnel Benefits Act of 1991 (Public Law 102-25), Washington, D.C., April 1992.